



Palace Theater

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is it art or is it documentary?

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Documentary photography has always held a precarious place in the history of the medium: on the one hand it is called into service to be a 'document' a recounting of a place or time, a record keeping device of extreme and minute criteria. On the other hand, whatever the original intent, the photograph speaks in a variety of ways. It can be lifted up to a status beyond the simple depiction of the subject matter, into a deeper delving of the cultural and iconic meanings of buildings, gestures, and ultimately, our personal histories. Or perhaps the photograph is considered for its formal qualities: light, form, mass, or line. A further dichotomy can be added to the mix. Contradictory thinking is explicit in the very nature and intent of the person behind the camera. There is the vehicle itself, which affords the ability to record even the cracks of the sidewalks, the weather and the time of day, forming a critical mix of intent and science. Each of these 'titles' presents its own set of criteria, rules and predicaments. As a documentary photographer with over thirty years' experience, recording and displaying images of vintage American movie theaters, I have debated these questions and conversations from the very beginning. Is it Art or is it Documentary? And are there times when it is neither or both? What does it take to create these images that speak to both sides of this debate? What are the respective roles of subjectivity and intent? Is there a place for storytelling and the ability of the photographer to share in the historic and communal connections that are embodied in the buildings themselves? I seek to raise and discuss these questions within this paper.

keywords Photography, Architecture, Documentary, Fine art, Fine art documentary, Art

Documentary or fine art –two terms that both relate to photography and that have been at times cohorts, at times rivals, and more often, reluctant bedfellows. This paper will discuss the definition of these terms as well as their closely related cousin, fine art documentary as they relate to photography in general, then more specifically as they relate to architectural photography.

Documentary photography has always held a precarious place in the history of the medium: on the one hand it is called into service to be a “document”, a recounting of a place or time, a record keeping device of extreme and minute criteria. On the other hand, whatever the original intent, photographs speak in a variety of ways, going beyond the simple depiction of the subject matter into a deeper delving of the cultural and iconic meanings of buildings, gestures, and ultimately, our personal histories. Or perhaps the photograph is considered for its formal qualities: light, form, mass, or line. A further dichotomy can be added to the mix. Contradictory thinking is explicit in the very nature and intent of the person behind the camera. The vehicle itself affords the ability to record even the cracks of the sidewalks, the weather and the time of day, forming a critical mix of intent and science. Each of these ‘titles’ presents its own set of criteria, rules and predicaments.

So is it art or is it documentary? And are there times when it is neither or both? What does it take to create these images that speak to both sides of this debate? What are the respective roles of subjectivity and intent? Is there a place for storytelling and the ability of the photographer to share in the historic and communal connections that are embodied in the images themselves? My premise is that all of these questions, and others, can be answered with a resounding Yes and No. I seek to raise and discuss them within the context of this symposium.

Lewis Bush, an accomplished London historian, writer and photographer, explored in his October 2013 blog post the origins of the term “documentary photography”. His research confirms what we now understand as documentary dates from 1640, from the old English meaning “to teach”. Thus documentary photographs should “teach” us something. This meaning is narrowed in the 1920s in French cinema, which introduced the idea that a characteristic of documentary is being factual or informative¹. In the early 20th century, photojournalism came to the forefront of newspaper and magazine publications with strict unwritten bylaws of what was permissible, and further solidified this concept.

Photographs that were taken as documents of life were accepted as visual stories that recorded events and evidence². “Journalism”, is a label with a heavy definition: no bias, no intervention of opinion or manipulation of content. Photographs presented as unaltered, truthful depictions of what had transpired in front of the camera were published for the general public, and held the explicit underlying disclosure that there was transparency in the information presented³. Architectural photography quickly fell into the category of “commercial” work, work for hire, and the same perimeters as photojournalism applied in this genre as well. To be taken seriously, a photographer did not mention the idea of using the skills encompassed by artists such as painting or drawing. To do so would have been crossing the line and embracing self-reflection.

If documentary photography teaches or informs us, the definition of photographic art is that it stands in contrast to this idea, as it presents a subjective viewpoint and authentic “voice” embraced by the artist photographer. Leo Tolstoy could easily have been describing this “voice” when he wrote, “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them”⁴. Thus, fine art photography”... describes any image taken by a camera where the intention is aesthetic”⁵. In addition, these photographs are noted for their technical excellence, calculated compositions, and specific visual effects.

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Fine art documentary photography is an even more recent concept. While the census seems to conclude that there are several characteristics that overlap between documentary and fine art, the distinguishing feature of fine art documentary photography seems to be a combination of aesthetic qualities, with a motive beyond pure aesthetic pleasure. These photographs are aesthetically beautiful but uncomfortable to view as they advocate passionately for the recognition that there are more questions than answers when it comes to the subject of the photograph. 2012 New York Photo Festival organizer Daniel Powell relates that where art and documentary photography overlap is "the largest interplay in the photo world in general"⁶. Fine art documentary begs to tell a story, much as photojournalism does. The image aesthetics pull the audience in, but the delivery and depth of storytelling keeps the viewer engaged. How then are we to come to terms with what is documentary, what is art and what is fine art documentary photography?

For documentary photographers, being relegated to one of those categories and not all three has been the subject of many discussions over the course of the past 175 years. From the very beginning of the medium, those practitioners of light writing (from the Greek words photo=light and graphy=writing)⁷ debated this themselves. Some thought photography was merely an instrument to be used in service of other sciences; some saw it as a new art form; and others proposed that the final judgment be held off to explore all the vast applications of this invention that promised infinite uses. William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the Calotype photographic process (which formed the basis of the negative/positive process of photography for the next 150 years or so) saw this new invention as part of the sciences, important in recording details with accuracy and serving those doing research in multiple arenas. In 1860 the *London Review* acknowledged that photography was "...one of the most wonderful conquests which the human intellect has made"⁸.



f1_The Open Door

Plate VI. The Pencil of Nature, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London. 1844. William Henry Fox Talbot

An early use of documentary photography was the recording of accomplishments of humankind in building structures. The "Boulevard du Temple" image of a shoeshine stand and the surrounding buildings was a seminal image made by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the inventor who introduced photography to the world at the French Academy of Sciences in 1839⁹. Talbot, in *Pencil of Nature*, cited as the first photographic book published as a complete volume, included multiple architectural images, including Queens College in Oxford, a boulevard in Paris, and his own residence, Lacock Abbey. These images represent hours of compositional decisions and invested energy of technique with descriptions that include the hour the image was recorded, the camera angle, the implications of time and weather on the structure, as well as buildings that are visible in the background of the image¹⁰. This is not unlike the information provided by 20th century photographers Hilda and Bernhard Becher for their "Typologies". Curiously, Talbot gives us no description of how the image was made or any of the technical difficulties of his process.

So how did the concept of using photography as an artistically composed document evolve over the next 175 years? How does intent play into this debate and is this where documentary photography comes into its own? To begin, one must acknowledge that the act of photographing itself was not considered an art, although William Talbot may have anticipated the concept since he named his process "Calotype" derived from the Greek word *kalos*, meaning "beautiful"¹¹. Talbot gives us a further hint in his description of plate VI, "The Open Door" in the *Pencil of Nature*, telling us, "The chief object of the present work is to place on record some of the early beginnings of a new art"¹².

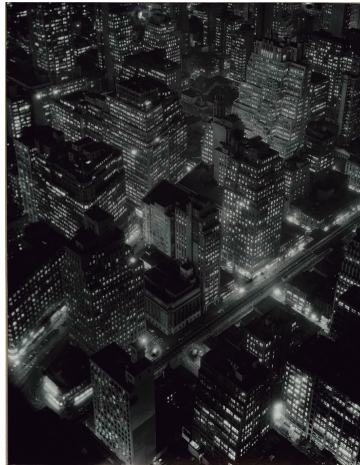
While Talbot may have anticipated art photography, it is not until the 20th century that the genre was championed, most notably by Alfred Stieglitz. To this end, he is often called the "father of American Photography". His art gallery 291 in New York City pushed this agenda, looking beyond the skill and technique involved in photography to the artistic vision revealed in a photograph. Stieglitz celebrated photography as an art form in his published journal *Camera Work*. Frederick H. Evans, a landscape and architectural photographer was the first British photographer published in *Camera Work*. A member of the British Linked Ring and later an honorary member of the British Photographic Society, Evans was known for his platinum prints of cathedrals from England and France. His photographs captured the exceptional atmospheric light that showcased hand-hewn details of stone and wood, bringing the structures to life with warmth and personality. "He often spent weeks studying the light in a cathedral at various times of day, waiting to catch the precise effect he sought. In Evan's view light represented spiritual enlightenment"¹³. Stieglitz's publication of such a persuasive advocate helped to make the case for architectural photography as an art form. Photographic artists were those who did not make their living at photography, but did it for the love of the medium.

Whether photographs are documentary, photojournalism, or fine art, human intervention and expression inherently create bias. In *History Matters*, James Curtis suggests, "If we are to determine the meaning of a documentary photograph we must begin by establishing the historical context for both the image and its creator. A documentary photographer is an historical actor bent upon communicating a message to an audience. Documentary photographs are more than expressions of artistic skill; they are conscious acts of persuasion. The work of the most accomplished photographers reveals a fervent desire to let images tell a story"¹⁴. In the beginning of the 20th century, Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine used their photographs as documents of inhumane situations to challenge the general public into rectifying the humanitarian challenges presented in their images. The assumption that photographs were unbiased documents continued with the work of the U.S. Government office of the Farm Security Administration under the guidance of Roy Stryker, who was keenly aware of Lewis Hines work, having used Hines' photographs when he taught economics at Columbia University. As Historical Section Chief, Information Division of the

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FSA, Stryker utilized the storytelling ability of images to write scripts for the photographers to show what was happening across America. This effort ultimately became the largest documentary project in the world at over one hundred seventy thousand photographs. The photographers themselves were aware of the agenda (now called propaganda) they had been called on to fulfill, but throughout felt the work they were doing was telling the truth. "What impels me to click the shutter is not what things look like but what they mean"¹⁵. Jack Delano, a photographer working under Roy Stryker exclaimed aloud what those working on this project believed and practiced.

Inspired by Eugene Atget's documentation of the changing face of Paris architecture at the turn of the 20th century, a young photographer named Berenice Abbott pursued and received a grant from the U.S. government Federal Works Project Administration to document New York City. Abbott recognized dramatic change in the city and knew the time was imminent for her to record in much the same way that Atget had done in Paris. Her documentary portfolio from 1934-1939 became the book called *Changing New York*. One of her most famous images, "Night Aerial View, Midtown Manhattan" is a dizzying view from atop a skyscraper. In order to get this image, Abbott calculated for a fifteen-minute exposure on the longest day of the year, December 20, so that office lights would still be illuminated before people went home for the day against the already dark skyline.



f2_Night Aerial View

Midtown Manhattan, New York, NY, 1933. Berenice Abbott. Smithsonian Institute Catalog Number 69.216.10, http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_321976

To be out of the wind she secured a window inside of another building from which to make her image¹⁶. Abbott was expressing what many other photographers had begun at nearly the same time, a record of a city, its architecture, and its culture which would convey a specific time and place for future generations, done as documentary, artistically rendered –the intersection of documentary and fine art.

This intersection was further enhanced with the plethora of magazines geared to selling ideal living and the idealized city in the U.S. following WWII. Architectural photography, considered “commercial” work, became a thriving area of the photographic industry. “After World War II, modern architecture in the United States became a metaphor for the better life that had long been promised”¹⁷. “For a photographer of the time, the challenge was to depict industry and the functional through the abstractions of the two-dimensional surface, and to do it in a way that both revealed what a thing is and also demonstrated its social essence and cultural meaning. ... Today when separated from their original context, these photographs constitute more than a nostalgic look at the past or a historical document. They are works of art”¹⁸.

Two architectural photographers who might have identified their work as art, documentary or even fine art documentary, had the terms been in more common use, are Julius Shulman and Ezra Stoller. Both of these photographers brought into focus cultural and iconic representations of architecture, images that even today are modern and transcendent of time. Their depictions of concrete and wood, glass and space still rivet us with the formal qualities of light, form, mass and line. Neither Shulman nor Stoller identified themselves as artists, but from a 21st century view, their work is perceived as such.

Shulman delighted in saying “In a way, you can stop time”¹⁹. He did just that for over seventy years, making images of contemporary California homes, including photographs for a series of homes now known as the Case Study Houses, a cause championed by John Entenza in *Arts and Architecture* magazine, as well as photographing for such architects as Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles Eames, and Richard Neutra. Shulman got his start from images he made with a Kodak vest pocket-folding camera of a house designed by Neutra. Shulman's most famous images showcase the compositional and lighting techniques that propelled him to success. A black and white photograph of the Kaufmann House, designed by Richard Neutra in Palm Springs, 1947, provides an excellent example.



f3_Kaufmann House

Palm Springs, CA, 1947. Julius Shulman. Richard Neutra, Architect. Gelatin Silver Print. Getty Research Institute 2004.R.10

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With a background of receding gray tonal mountains, a pool in the foreground and floor to ceiling glass walls of the house jutting into the middle ground, people complete the scenery, bringing attention to each level of the image. The onlooker's eye travels back and forth throughout the image, making the viewer part of the storyline in the photo. Shulman declared in a 1984 interview, "The camera is the least important element in our work. Photography is dependent on the eye, the mind, the heart and the soul of the photographer. Many times, even architects aren't aware of the presence of their structures, and they will ask, 'How did you get this picture?'"²⁰. In another example of Shulman's extraordinary skill, Case Study House #22, the Stahl House, a cantilevered glass living room appears suspended over the Los Angeles cityscape in the background, capturing the afterglow of the sun against the street grid of lights below. Shulman often espoused that there was no limit to what could be done with photography. In the hands of an artist, he would be right.

As a documentarian, Ezra Stoller recorded some of the most famous buildings of the last midcentury. "As a student of architecture and design prior to devoting himself to photography, he brought an informed view to all his work, one that reflects not only a great technical sophistication in using his camera but also an intuitive feel for how to tell the story of a building in pictures"²¹. Yet he rarely recorded buildings the way that architects conceive them through plans and elevations. Instead, Stoller sought to capture the essence of the structure, with views that would showcase the living, breathing entity, not the perfection of the frontal elevation. "By photographing the real thing in real space, Stoller gave architects a kind of visual report on the success of their practice"²². His images stand in sharp focus, espousing every minute detail to be not only recorded, but to be *seen*. "They show the devotion to precise description and full tonal rendition than an earlier generation of photographers –among them Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston– pioneered as the hallmarks of photography intended to be seen as Art..."²³. With the crisp lines and tonalities created by the small aperture and technical perfection, there is the sense that "...the photographer has intervened in the scene by choosing what part is most important; instead, we see the world within the frame as if it had chosen to present itself"²⁴. Philip Johnson, world famous architect, made a photographic pun when he stated that no modern building was complete until it had been "Stollarized"²⁵.

Photographers such as Walker Evans, William Eggleston and William Christenberry chose to embrace the title of artist and readily admit to their own viewpoints and biases. While working under Roy Stryker for the FSA Walker Evans went as far as to say that "... he subverted his art for the simple depiction of a moment"²⁶; when he worked with writer James Agee for a summer on what would become the book *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, he fully embraced the art of his photographic language. Carefully crafted images that may visually seem close to the FSA photographs reveal a deeper and more complex viewpoint when studied in the context of Agee's accompanying text. By the 1970s, William Eggleston's views of the southern vernacular resonated with the MOMA's curator of photography John Szarkowski. Eggleston's color images of buildings in Tennessee and Mississippi literally expanded the vocabulary of color photography, taking the mundane, ordinary looking structures out of their context and focusing on their minute details and garish colors. Historically there had been hundreds of black and white images extolling the beauty of the weather worn wooden structures by Walker Evans but Eggleston's buildings reflected the color of the brown dirt; street lights glow an eerie green as the last pink shades of sunset fill the sky beyond the singular city corner structure. William Christenberry, another southerner from Alabama, had introduced Eggleston to color film in 1965, showing Eggleston his own images, made on a Kodak brownie camera, of southern architecture: old general stores, broken down houses, and repurposed buildings, all within the county lines of where Walker Evans had made his images for *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men* more than thirty years earlier. Christenberry's images are deceptively simple, but hauntingly complex. Over the course of the last fifty years he has returned to the places in the county he grew up in, and

has photographed the wearing down, wearing out, and disappearance of many southern architectural treasures. "Southern in context, universal in nature, the main body of his work speaks of life, aging, wearing away. It possesses the ability to haunt"²⁷. The fact that these three photographers worked in the south is not the only commonality that they share. They crafted images that position the viewer in the story of these very ordinary, but very specific places, informing us of a time, space and place in the American experience that has a shorter lifetime than we want to admit. It is this storytelling designation that makes them documentary, and their authentic voice that makes them art.

There are other current photographers who embrace the layered meaning of fine art documentary by photographing buildings and their cultural complexities. These include Stephen Shore and Thomas Struth, both heavily influenced by Bernd and Hilla Becher, the husband and wife team who essentially defined an entire generation of fine art documentary photography and artists. The Becher's work included a meticulous and calculated documentation of industrial buildings, from water towers to coal furnaces. The story here is not so much about the individual structures, but the collection of the "typologies" as they became known, an accounting of form by way of function in architectural depiction. Thus, the Becher's work may be said to fall into the formal category of documentary, but one might be hard pressed to count them as architectural photography as the work is done with the specific perimeters that the photographers have set, and not for the purpose of representing the actual locations, but more for the cataloging of a style of structure. Although they have been exhibited worldwide in art galleries, some would question their status as art, due to the outwardly impersonal nature that the images project. However, when Hilla Becher was interviewed regarding the work, she stated that she and Bernd were not concerned with the question of what genre their work fell into²⁸. Perhaps, as Nicholas Olsberg of *The Architectural Review* has noted, we should "...stop pretending that a photograph, by observing familiar conventions, actually tells us what a building looks like when what it really does is tell us how one photographer proposes we might look at it: sometimes, at its best, to their own surprise"²⁹.

As a photographer who embraces a biased aesthetic viewpoint, my images catalog American movie theaters built before 1965, and fall into the genre of fine art documentary. Like Eggleston, Christenberry, Shores and Soth, I have specifically chosen to work in color, as the theaters themselves demand to be portrayed in their full regalia. Color also helps to ground the work in the current time period, all the more useful for historic records, and more importantly, for connecting a cultural memory and conversation. *Please Remain Standing* is my systematic and intentional recording of movie theaters for over thirty years, from Alaska to Texas, Florida to California, New York to New Mexico. Even as I have worked, theaters have closed and disappeared. The end of analog film distribution in October of 2013 sealed the doors for many theaters finding it impossible to switch to digital projection. While some resourceful communities have found ways to reinvent their favorite hangouts, others have been lost to history, making this project all the more urgent. For the viewer, the experience of seeing these images is meant to be a call to action, to honor and preserve that which will never be built again in such a grand or extravagant manner. For those theaters lost to the wrecking ball, the photographs save the reality of their existence and in that way, they can continue to tell their own story. In the same way that Stoller's and Shulman's images record architecture that was of its time and place, several of my photographs are the only known records of these cultural icons.

Perhaps this is the height of what art, or documentary, or fine art documentary, or any type of recording of human activity can accomplish; touch our lives and infuse the lives of others with the experiences we have had. In the end, does it really matter what we call it?

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f4_Carib Theater

Clearwater, FL. 1982. Demolished 1983. Benita VanWinkle

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